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Visible evidence

By observing students at Leeds Metropolitan University, **Katherine Everest**, **Debbie Morris** and colleagues were able to provide library spaces for the way they actually work, not the way we think they ought to work.



HEADINGLEY LIBRARY IS ON three floors of a listed, turn-of-the-century building. It caters for approximately 8,000 students and recently it has been transformed from a traditional library into an innovative, student-centred library for the 21st century. We wanted an innovative library where, above all, the students come first. Our inspiration was taken from the way students work and learn.

For example, many students work while talking to their colleagues, using many technological devices simultaneously – and eating. Group work is now very common, so we decided to create as much group study space as possible. We discovered that, while they wanted to study in groups, students did not necessarily want to study in a private room. So we turned the whole of the ground floor over to an open-plan group study area. Sets of large tables and brightly coloured tub chairs are available and students study in pairs or groups, talking, surrounded by laptops and mobiles. The first impression of a lively, vibrant buzz is striking as one enters the library. It challenges traditional assumptions of what a library should be.

• **'With fewer staff needed to support the desk, staff now have the opportunity to offer help in different ways which include 'roving' throughout the library and helping students at point of need.'**

Previously students were confronted with three different help desks depending on what services they wanted to use. The new library incorporates a single point of help which is located on the group study floor. With fewer staff needed to support the desk, staff now have the opportunity to offer help in different ways which include 'roving' throughout the library and helping students at point of need.

Not all students want to work in a noisy space all the time so we provided a large room on the first floor with individual study carrels for those looking for a quieter environment. Bookings for group study rooms used to be continuously oversubscribed, but the open-plan ground floor area has met the demand. A few bookable student meeting rooms are still available for groups who want to work away from other students, for example to practise presentations.

The library was designed as a 24-hour study environment. Our observation also showed that students like to eat and drink while they are working. There was a room that we were unable to house resources in, so here we created more group study space where eating and drinking were permitted. Extra bins and a more rigorous cleaning regime have kept the room a pleasant environment to work in.

Flexibility

We took a policy decision not to purchase any more fixed PCs. Instead, we provide wireless laptops for loan. This means that any space is multi-purpose and students can read, write or use IT in all of them.

Another decision was to disassociate collections from specific spaces or areas. We had collections of books, AV materials, language materials, school practice materials and printed journals all in designated areas and we wanted students to feel they could use them anywhere in the library.

The main bookstock was moved to one floor, where previously it had been split, making it easier for students to find what they wanted. Similarly, the other collections were housed in smaller rooms, freeing up the study space they had been associated with. Students are now encouraged to take materials to the kind of study space that suits them.

As for printed journals, a decision was made to move the collection to an open-access compact rolling stack. This has meant that the large space that it previously occupied is now available for mixed use – students can still take printed journals there to study if they wish to, and they may be working alongside a student looking at e-journals on their laptop.

Future-proofing

We wanted to have as little fixed furniture as possible. Our furniture was relatively traditional and low-cost, and is heavily used. Carpet colours change on each floor to indicate a different type of space. With the flexibility designed into each space, in the future the library could potentially have a completely different look and feel without the need to reconfigure the building. Indeed, we are now looking at transforming one of our more traditional teaching rooms into a hi-tech, inspirational learning room in which students can work outside their classroom.

Because the library provides learning facilities outside the classrooms (language students, for example, have access to self-service language resources 24 hours a day) students on all courses pass through the building, some on their way to specific classes, some to stay and learn independently. The redesign has been a great success. It has a 'lively, vibrant buzz' said one student. And other appreciative comments are: 'I like the big space when you come in. It's a lot more welcoming,' and 'It's just like studying in your front room.'

■ Katherine Everest is Professional Stream Leader: Library Services & Operations, and Debbie Morris is Library Systems Developer, Leeds Metropolitan University. This is an abridged version of the article which is to appear in *Sconul Focus*, Summer/Autumn 2008.



NEWS...

Library as place

The Library Visual Scan© is a feature of CILIP's 'The Library as Place' Executive Briefing on 23 October. It's a system designed by Aaron Cohen Associates, experts in library planning. It evaluates space needs as they relate to services, operations and the potential for change. In a very 'hands-on' workshop, via a virtual library 'tour', delegates will get to grade spaces, and consider how they would improve them. The findings will then be analysed in an open discussion. The company has completed more than 1,000 library projects over 40 years. Alexander Cohen leads the workshop, supported by Diana Edmonds, Head of Libraries at Haringey Council.

www.cilip.or.uk/libraryasplace

Safer seats

The Furniture Industry Research Association (Fira) is to launch a certification scheme to help specifiers choose better furniture products – and to make pupils more willing to learn and less prone to back pain. The average height and weight of 10-16-year olds has increased since the 1970s, when the last major study was conducted. However, much of the furniture used in schools takes the 'one size fits all' approach. Recurrent back pain in school-age children is increasing, with one UK study finding 36 per cent of 11-14 year-olds experiencing the condition.

www.fira.co.uk



School furniture testing at Fira's world leading facilities

Fabulous displays

A fun, practical course which shows you how to produce eye-catching displays is being run in Lincoln by CoFHE East Midlands. 'Creating Fabulous Displays: the Alternative Display Company' is on 9 June and guarantees many ideas for how to make your library collections more appealing including 3-D effects and suspended displays, using colours and different types of materials. You get the chance to put your skills into practice. Non-CoFHE members are welcome. The venue is Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln. Details: Emma Sansby emma.sansby@bishoptg.ac.uk